

People & Places

Television

Strong's work is topical

'Dopesick,' a chilling tale of opioid crisis

LOS ANGELES, Oct. 16, (AP): Actor **Danny Strong** pops up regularly in an eclectic batch of series ranging from the lightness of "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" and "Gilmore Girls" to the dark corruption of "Billions."

But when it comes to investing his time as an Emmy-winning writer and producer, there's consistency in the projects, whether the subject is politics ("Recount," "Game Change") or race ("Lee Daniels' The Butler"). Strong's work is topical and trenchant.

Hulu's "Dopesick" fits the pattern. The eight-part miniseries about America's opioid crisis weaves together the painkiller's devastating toll and the actions of those who aided it or failed to stop it. Three episodes debuted Wednesday on the streaming service, with the rest to be released weekly.



Strong

"I want to work on things that feel important, the stories that need to be told," Strong said. "When done correctly, these kind of stories, the weight of the subject matter and what they're trying to expose, makes them better pieces of entertainment."

While some may equate socially relevant projects with being "good for you, or going to school, I don't view it that way at all," he said in an interview.

Michael Keaton, playing a family doctor who becomes an unwitting part of the problem, finds a similar sense of fulfillment with "Dopesick" and socially pertinent films in which he's appeared.

"I'm in a fortunate position where what I do for a living affords me an opportunity to possibly change things or affect people in some way," he said during a Q&A with TV critics. "If you're talking about 'Spotlight' or 'Worth' ... or other things that I've done, I'm fortunate in that regard."

Strong spent three years researching and writing or co-writing all but one episode of "Dopesick," which draws in part on journalist Beth Macy's nonfiction book of the same name. What he learned was eye-opening and ultimately maddening.

Heartbreaking

"It wasn't until I started diving into the material that I thought, 'This is just an insane, insane story,'" said Strong, also a director and producer of the series. "I was just so outraged by what they had done at Purdue Pharma."

The ensemble cast includes Michael Stuhlbarg as Richard Sackler, depicted as a mastermind of the expanded use of Purdue's OxyContin, and Peter Sarsgaard and Rosario Dawson as federal adversaries of the Sackler family-owned company.

Drug users are a crucial, heartbreaking part of the drama, including a young Virginia mine worker, Betsy (Kaitlyn Dever), who becomes addicted to opioids after being injured. Her parents (Mare Winningham, Ray McKinnon) are frantic to save her.

Some characters, including Richard Sackler, are based on real individuals, while others are fictional or composite figures, which Strong said allowed for a more universal story.

Macy, whose 2018 book's full title is "Dopesick: Dealers, Doctors, and the Drug Company That Addicted America," said her work was "all about what happened on the ground, from the perspective of the victims and the people fighting back."

A dramatization with a comprehensive view of the complex, long-unfolding problem was overdue, said Macy, a series producer.

"It's hard to capture in one article or even one book," she said. The series spans "the last 25 years and puts it in an understandable form: This is what happened to our nation, and this is why it's still part of why we lost 93,000 people last year to overdoses."

That is the estimated number of US drug overdose deaths in 2020 and an increase of 29% from 2019, according to the Centers for Disease Control. Opioid-linked deaths are at a record pace, reaching 70,000 last year. While some opioid deaths over the past two decades have been attributed to OxyContin and other prescription painkillers, most are from illicit forms of opioids such as heroin and illegally made fentanyl.

The series provides context for the spate of headlines about Purdue Pharma's role and its protracted bankruptcy proceedings, Macy said.

Last month, a federal judge gave conditional approval to a settlement that would remove the billionaire Sackler family from ownership of Purdue and reorganize the business into a charity-oriented company whose profits would go to government-directed efforts to prevent and treat addiction.

A growing number of appeals against the settlement have been filed from states like California, Maryland and Washington, and by some Canadian local governments and entities.

"If their bankruptcy goes through they will be immune from any future litigation, which is viewed by many activists in this field as a great tragedy," Strong said.

In federal bankruptcy court video testimony given in August, Richard Sackler, a former president of Purdue, repeatedly answered "no" when asked if he, his family or the company caused the nation's opioid crisis. Other Sackler members have denied wrongdoing, although their company has pleaded guilty twice to federal crimes over their opioid practices.

The seeds for "Dopesick" were planted by series producer John Goldwyn, who had initially considered making a movie about the crisis, Strong said. The story proved too sprawling for a movie but right for TV.

"Limited series are really breaking through. They've been the heart of most of the cultural conversations with entertainment," he said. "You're seeing a lot of great writers working in that space, telling really interesting stories over several hours. You can go deeper than you can in film."

Also:

LOS ANGELES: Issa Rae's groundbreaking comedy "Insecure" begins its fifth and final season Sunday, Oct. 24, on HBO (10 p.m. EDT). Based in part on her life and on her web series "The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl," the series follows Rae's fictional counterpart, Issa Dee, and best friend Molly (Yvonne Orji) through the highs and lows of love and career. Rae's own star has soared, with movies ("The Photograph," "The Lovebirds"), a record label and more to come. In an 2017 interview, Rae said it was rewarding that "Insecure" had proven wrong the naysayers who claimed its authentic stories about characters of color wouldn't find an audience.



This image released by Hulu shows Kaitlyn Dever in a scene from 'Dopesick,' an eight-part miniseries about America's opioid crisis, which premiered last Wednesday with three episodes. (AP)



Mick Jagger, (center), of the Rolling Stones performs with bandmates, (from left), Ron Wood, Steve Jordan and Keith Richards, Thursday, Oct. 14, at SoFi Stadium in Inglewood, Calif. (AP)

Music

'I feel more home onstage'

Cooper back on the road

LONDON, Oct. 16, (AP): During the pandemic, shock rocker Alice Cooper replaced touring with tap dancing.

The 73-year-old rock icon went from touring with Queen and playing to crowds of 95,000 to an audience of zero. He admitted the transition was hard.

"It was like coming off of a drug because the adrenaline is your drug onstage. I mean, everybody's sober. But you miss that adrenaline, that one-on-one," he recalled, speaking from Charlotte, North Carolina.

Cooper isn't a fan of Zoom and wasn't converted to online performances during lockdown: "It's still flat and there's no audience. So don't try to fake it."

Instead, he spent his down time with his family in Phoenix developing an unlikely new skill — tap dancing. The family conducted practices in their back yard and, despite now being able to soft shoe, Cooper insists his new moves won't make it into his stage show.

Finally back on the road, Cooper admitted he was even "giddy going into rehearsal," adding "I feel more home onstage than I do offstage." He is playing a number of live dates until November, and predicts he will be on the road for most of next year. One of the key elements of his live show are his snakes, which he says have an unpredictable nature.

"The funny thing about the boa

million.

Mary Bono's attorney said the family's moves are within their rights and the law.

"The Copyright Act allows Sonny's widow and children to reclaim Sonny's copyrights from publishers, which is what they did," attorney Daniel Schacht said in a statement. "Representative Bono remains open to continuing a private discussion about



Cher



Chappelle

this, but we are confident that, if necessary, the court will affirm their position." (AP)

CHICAGO: A judge on Friday denied a last-ditch effort to dismiss a criminal case against actor Jussie Smollett, who is accused of lying to police when he reported that he was the victim of a racist attack in downtown Chicago in January 2019.

An attorney for the former "Empire" actor said Smollett's rights were being violated since he had already performed community service and given up a \$10,000 bond under a previous deal with Cook County prosecutors to drop charges.

"A deal is a deal. That's ancient principle," attorney Nyenye Uche said.

But Judge James Linn noted that Smollett's case now was being led by a special prosecutor appointed by another judge, an arrangement that he would not upset. (AP)

Obit

Wrote 'Hatchet'

Children's author Paulsen dies at 82

NEW YORK, Oct. 16, (AP): **Gary Paulsen**, the acclaimed and prolific children's author who often drew upon his rural affinities and wide-ranging adventures for tales that included "Hatchet," "Brian's Winter" and "Dogsong," has died at age 82.

Random House Children's Books announced that Paulsen died "suddenly" Wednesday but did not immediately provide further details. Literary agent Jennifer Flannery told The Associated Press that he died at his home in New Mexico, where he lived with his third wife, Ruth Wright Paulsen, an artist who illustrated some of his work.

Author of more than 100 books, with sales topping 35 million, Paulsen was a three-time finalist for the John Newbery Medal for the year's best children's book and recipient in 1997 of the American Library Association's Margaret A. Edwards Award for lifetime achievement.

He was a Minnesota native who deeply identified with the outdoors, whether sailing on the Pacific Ocean, hiking in New Mexico or braving the cold of the Alaskan dogsled race, the Iditarod. For a time he lived in a cabin in rural Minnesota, where he finished his first novel "The Special War," and on a houseboat in the Pacific Ocean. He spent his latter years on a remote ranch in New Mexico, a bearded outdoorsman sometimes likened to Ernest Hemingway.

"I can't live in towns anymore," he told The New York Times in 2006. "The last time I was up in Santa Fe, I wasn't there 20 minutes before I brewed up, almost slugged a tourist on the steps of my wife's gallery."

Paulsen received the Newbery Honor prize for "Hatchet," "The Winter Room" and "Dogsong," about a young native Alaskan in search of a simpler past and the old ways. He also wrote hundreds of articles, poetry, historical fiction and such nonfiction works as the memoir "Gone to the Woods: Surviving a Lost Childhood," which came out earlier this year. His final novel, "Northwind," will be published in January by Farrar, Straus and Giroux Books for Younger Readers.

Isolation

Many readers knew him best for his "Hatchet" novels, beginning with the eponymous 1986 release, in which 13-year-old Brian Robeson survives a plane crash and lives for weeks in the wilderness, relying in part on the hatchet his mother had given him. In an introduction for the book's 30th anniversary edition, Paulsen wrote that the novel "came from the darkest part" of his childhood, when books and the woods were his escapes from the pain of his parents' miserable marriage and his own social isolation.

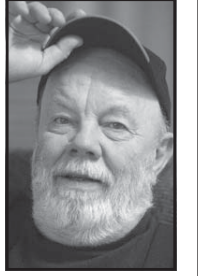
"On my own, under the trees or on the lake or next to the river, I was protected and as far from danger as I'd ever been," he wrote. "In the wilderness, I was at ease. I learned the rules and I not only survived, I thrived. The woods and books are the only reason I got through my childhood in one piece."

The "Hatchet" series continued with "The River," "Brian's Winter," in which Paulsen imagined an alternate ending for the first novel, "Brian's Return" and "Brian's Hunt." He also turned out such series as the Francis Tucket adventure books and Murphy Westerns.

Paulsen, who grew up in Thief River Falls, Minnesota, had all too much personal experience to draw from for his work. He would recall his parents becoming so debilitated by rage and alcohol that he was essentially taking care of himself by his early teens, even hunting for his own food with a makeshift bow and arrow. He graduated from high school, raised his own tuition money to attend Bemidji State University and, in his early 20s, served in the US Army. He had been a devoted reader since his teens, when he stopped into a local library on a freezing day, and in his mid-20s felt such a compulsion to write that he abruptly left his job as an aerospace engineer in California.

"The need to write hit me like a brick. I had a career and a family and I did all the things that responsible grown-ups do until suddenly, irrevocably, I knew had to write." He explained in the introduction to the "Hatchet" anniversary edition. "I edited a grubby men's magazine and, every night, I slaved over short stories and articles for two editors who ripped me to shreds every morning."

"They didn't leave a single sentence unscathed, but they taught me to write clean and fast. And the dance with words gave me a joy and a purpose I had been looking for my entire life."



Paulsen